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SUBJECT: MALAYSIA: MIXED VIEWS ON BURMA RELIEF EFFORTS

REF: KL 363 HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO CYCLONE NARGIS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Elements of the Malaysian mainstream media, civil society and the political opposition have harshly condemned the refusal of the Burmese regime to allow in international relief teams and its insistence on going ahead with the May 10 referendum. Government officials, however, continue to put a much more positive spin on the behavior of the Burmese junta, and there are no indications that the GOM intends to abandon its traditional "non-interference" stance in regard to Burma. End Summary.

¶2. (U) In a May 14 editorial the New Straits Times (which faithfully follows the ruling coalition line on domestic political issues but sometimes reports more independently on foreign developments) harshly criticized the "stubborn paranoia" of a Burmese regime "more concerned with garnering approval for its farcical referendum," than with allowing help to reach its citizens. The NST went so far as to raise the issue of the UN's "responsibility to protect" concept. The Malay-language Utusan Malaysia also condemned the junta's "arrogance" in a May 13 editorial and local internet blogs have conveyed strong criticism of the Burmese authorities. The official news agency Bernama, however, has confined its reports primarily to quoting the more positive assessments of GOM officials.

¶3. (U) On May 14 Parliamentary opposition leader Wan Azizah, who is also vice president of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), tabled a motion for an emergency debate in regard to the Government using political influence and diplomatic channels to persuade the Burmese junta and accept humanitarian assistance. She had earlier tabled a motion calling on the GOM to persuade the Burmese regime to defer the May 10 referendum. In a May 12 statement rejecting that motion, Parliament Speaker Pandikar Amin Mulia asserted that the issue did not qualify as "urgent" and that it was not right for Malaysia to meddle in the internal affairs of another country. Lim Kit Siang of the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP), who has been active in AIPMC, has strongly criticized ASEAN's reaction to the Burma crisis, maintained that the organization's inaction "makes a total mockery of the charter" and advocating that ASEAN persuade the junta to open up or "face censure and possibly suspension." AIPMC Vice President Wan Azizah also addressed a letter to the Burmese ambassador to Malaysia critical of

the decision to proceed with the referendum.

¶4. (SBU) GOM officials continue to put a positive spin on the behavior of the Burmese regime. Quoting the Malaysian ambassador in Rangoon, Bernama reported on May 13 that "contrary to Western media reports that Myanmar was refusing to accept humanitarian aid from abroad" a planeload of Malaysian relief supplies (reftel) along with a team of Malaysian representatives, had been "welcomed" by Burmese officials. As of May 14, however, the Malaysian delegation, consisting of military, Red Crescent, National Security Council, MFA, and Health Ministry personnel, reportedly has not been permitted to travel outside Rangoon. A Special Malaysia Disaster and Rescue (SMART) team was formed and made preparations to fly to Burma, but the Burmese reportedly have told the GOM they do not need such a team. The Malaysian NGOs Salam and Nature Aid Foundation have both been stymied in their efforts to obtain Burma's permission to enter the country. Salam chairman Razali Ismail, the former UN Special Envoy to Burma, said he was "shocked" at the junta's attitude, which could lead to huge loss of life. PM Abdullah's son-in-law and close advisor Khairy Jamaluddin gently admonished the Burmese regime in May 12 remarks to Parliament, expressing hope that international assistance would reach the Burmese people without obstacles.

¶5. (SBU) The Ambassador and country team members continue to raise the need for urgent humanitarian action in Burma with Malaysian senior officials and politicians from both the ruling and opposition coalitions.

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¶6. (SBU) Comment: While as indicated above some domestic political sentiment does exist for a more activist GOM role on Burma, we see no indications that the GOM intends to abandon its traditional "non-interference" stance.

KEITH